

# AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

Martin Butlin and Ted Gott, *William Blake in the  
Collection of the National Gallery of Victoria*

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Martin Butlin and Ted Gott, *William Blake in the Collection of the National Gallery of Victoria*. With an Introduction by Irena Zdanowicz. Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1989. 196 pp. 104 color and 87 black & white illus. Hardbound \$49 Australian/paper \$39 Australian.

Reviewed by  
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The National Gallery of Victoria has long been known to Blake enthusiasts as the home of 36 of Blake's water colors illustrating Dante's *Divine Comedy*. These, along with two *Paradise Lost* designs, were purchased at the Linnell auction in 1918, a time when such a major investment in Blake was an adventurous undertaking for any institution. These treasures, along with some very recent acquisitions, prompted the Gallery to exhibit their Blake holdings in late summer 1989 and publish the full catalogue of the Blake collection reviewed here.

The first characteristic to attract Blakeans to the new catalogue is the number and quality of the color reproductions. The large (11 x 8 in.) format is roomy enough, although a good deal smaller than the Dante designs (approx. 14 1/2 x 20 3/4 in.), and the hard, semi-glossy paper takes an image with commendable precision. We can see the minute pencil lines in some of the Dante water colors and even sense the texture of their paper. In these respects, the illustrations compare favorably to the beautiful Dante reproductions in the August 1984 issue of that super-upscale magazine, *FMR*. I have not personally checked the color

fidelity of the catalogue's reproductions against the originals, but the tonal subtleties and range of hues inspire confidence. Even the reticulations of color printing, notoriously difficult to capture, are crisply reproduced from the Gallery's two little-known examples from *Europe* and *The Book of Urizen*, also acquired from the Linnell collection in 1918. Everything in the collection that is colored is reproduced in color, including all 14 plates from *Songs of Innocence* copy X and all the illustrations in the 1797 *Night Thoughts*. The latter is the first complete color reproduction of a hand-colored copy. All other Blakes in the Gallery are reproduced in monochrome, including reproductive engravings that rarely receive such attention. Oddly, the only clear descent from superior quality is in the black and white illustrations of the Job engravings. Some are flat and washed out, while others have the dark tones of the originals without loss of definition. But this minor lapse does not hinder this volume from being the handsomest catalogue of a Blake collection ever produced.

Does the text live up to the splendor of its visual companions? Yes—and in novel ways. Most catalogues devoted to a single collection offer a few brief comments on its formation, but in this instance we are given a full-dress essay on "The Melbourne Blakes—Their Acquisition and Critical Fortunes in Australia" (10-19) by Irena Zdanowicz, the Gallery's Senior Curator of Prints and Drawings. It is a fascinating tale of long-distance collecting that forced the Gallery to rely on advisors in London. The results were not always applauded by the locals; one reviewer referred to the recently-acquired Dante drawings as "glaring absurdities." Zdanowicz also provides detailed information on how the 102 Dante designs were in 1918 divided among the five museums participating in their purchase under a scheme managed by Britain's National Arts-Collections Fund. Future historians of Blake collecting in the twentieth

century will learn much from Zdanowicz's fine essay. For another study of the dispersal of the Dante water colors, see Krzysztof Z. Cieszkowski's article in *Blake* 23 (1989-90): 166-71.

The central section of the catalogue is devoted to Martin Butlin's "Innocence Regained: Blake's Late Illustrations to Milton and Dante" (20-87, including full-page color reproductions). With rhetoric clearly aimed at a non-specialist audience, Butlin begins with the claim that "in the case of most artists it is too facile to see direct links between the circumstances of the artist's life and the style and content of his or her works. . . . But Blake, the poet and painter, is one of the rare cases in which one can trace a close correlation between life and art" (20). From this shade of Gilchrist springs an example: "by the mid-1790s, both [Blake's] poetry and the illustrations with which he accompanied it had been completely transformed, from the innocence and optimism of the *Songs of Innocence* to the pessimism borne of experience of the *Songs of Experience*" (20). Having plucked that hoary chestnut from the antithetical fires of American Blake criticism, Butlin proceeds to more specific discussions of the works at issue. Matters improve quickly. The author of the great catalogue raisonné of Blake's paintings and drawings displays his considerable authority, expertise, and pictorial sensitivity in a thorough contextualist discussion of the composition, stylistic affinities, and general interpretive orientations of the two *Paradise Lost* water colors in the Gallery and its Dante holdings. This essay is followed by conventional catalogue entries on each drawing. I can find nothing strikingly new here in the way of basic facts or histories; if there are buried treasures, they are not easily mined. But to this material Butlin has added cogent summaries of the iconographic interpretations presented in A. S. Roe's *Blake's Illustrations to the Divine Comedy* (1953) and David Fuller's "Blake and Dante," *Art History* 11



(1988): 349-73. The latter disputes Roe's thesis that Blake is illustrating his own mythology more than Dante's. The argument has implications extending well beyond the Dante designs and should interest anyone working on Blake as an illustrator. Butlin's sympathies are clearly with Fuller—and in my view rightly so. As Yeats first suggested in 1896, Blake's "vision" operates through an extreme form of literalism, not through allegorical substitution.

Most collection and exhibition catalogues emphasize individual entries on specific works. Historical and critical narratives generally play subordinate roles and are reduced to brief summaries. Although Butlin's essay is more extensive than usual, his contribution remains within these broad generic norms. The last and longest major section of the Melbourne catalogue, Ted Gott's "Eternity in an Hour: The Prints of William Blake" (88-188), reverses these conventions. He offers a dozen short essays on Blake's works as a printmaker represented in the collection and relegates standard catalogue information to a terse appendix. This approach requires greater critical acumen than most curators can muster, but Gott carries off his innovative approach with considerable panache. Few readers will agree with all his observations, but all should be stimulated and informed. Gott's skepticism about received opinions is particularly refreshing in the context of a collection catalogue.

Gott devotes almost as much attention to Blake's reproductive prints as to his original graphics. As a result, we are given fine essays on Blake's engravings in Hunter's *Historical Journal*, Cumberland's *Thoughts on Outline*, and Rees's *Cyclopaedia*. The contextualizing here is much broader than in most collection catalogues, for Gott not only considers these texts and how Blake may have reacted to them, but also how these projects exemplify general relationships between the craft and commerce of printmaking



that shaped Blake's life. For Blake's innovative work in relief etching and color printing, Gott carefully describes each graphic process and its visual consequences. Blake's relationships with artists in his circle, particularly Cumberland and Flaxman, are nicely summarized. Although Gott's essays stand on their own as independent replacements for conventional catalogue entries, they are strung together like chapters to constitute an overview of Blake's major graphic genres from the late 1780s to his death.

I hope that I have said enough to convince readers of *Blake* that the new Melbourne catalogue rewards both eye and mind. For those interested in minute particulars, I append a few comments on, or additions to, Gott's observations on Blake's prints.

90: Gott suggests that, for "A Family of New South Wales" in Hunter's *Narrative*, Blake may have worked from "an already idealized finished copy-drawing of King's sketch from another journeyman's hand" rather than directly from the original drawing attributed to Philip King. There may indeed have been such an intervening drawing, but it is more likely that Blake executed it

than anyone else. An analogous situation is provided by the "Anubis" plate in Erasmus Darwin's *Botanic Garden* and its two preliminary drawings in the British Museum—a rough pencil sketch by Fuseli and a finished monochrome wash drawing by Blake. Gott finds that the alterations in the landscape background and foliage in the Hunter plate have disturbed the "novel antipodean setting" in the drawing and takes this as evidence for the work of another hand. But Blake, hardly an expert in Australian shrubbery, was just as capable of these conventionalizing maneuvers as anyone else. For my eyes, the landscape in the plate is compositionally finer (even if less antipodean) than the rather vague patches in King's less than expert drawing.

97: Copy X of *Songs of Innocence*, acquired by the Gallery in 1988, has been disbound and the leaves "mounted separately for display." Gott points out that the previous binding (cream morocco by Gray of Cambridge) "will allow Copy X to be reformed as a book" (97-8), but does not explicitly indicate that this will be done after the exhibition. Copy X was probably printed in the same press run as copy I (Huntington Library), also in green ink on Edmeads & Pine paper. The two plates of "The Little Black Boy" in the Keynes Collection, Fitzwilliam Museum, were very probably once part of copy X—see Craig Hartley, "Songs of Innocence," *Print Quarterly* 6 (1989): 63. Both are reproduced in color by Gott. As he points out, we can also assume that the volume once contained the first plates of "The Little Girl Lost" and "Spring" since their second plates are present. These first plates could not have been printed on the same single leaf and properly precede their respective companions, and thus the recto/verso printing of copy X suggests that it contained two further plates. Another candidate for inclusion is "The Ecchoing Green" (both plates recto/verso in green ink on one leaf) at Harvard.



110-12: Pl. 21 of *The Book of Urizen*, once probably part of *A Large Book of Designs* (B), appears to be a maculature printed at high pressure, with the impression in *A Large Book of Designs* (A) as the first pull. For an interesting essay on the Melbourne print, see Gerald Bentley, Jr., "The Shadow of Los: Embossing in Blake's 'Book of Urizen,'" in *Art Bulletin of Victoria* 30 (1989): 18-23.

125: Schiavonetti's copperplates of Blake's *Grave* illustrations are in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, not the Library of Congress. The same is true of Blake's Dante copperplates (152).

126: The engraver who worked briefly on Stothard's "Pilgrimage to Canterbury" was Francis Engleheart (1775-1849), not "Eagleheart."

133-34: *Jerusalem* pl. 51. The color reproduction of this splendid hand-colored impression reminded me strongly of the palette used in copy E. A comparison between this illustration and pl. 51 in the Blake Trust facsimile of E not only confirmed this similarity but also brought to my attention the previously unrecorded fact that the plate in copy E is printed in black ink, whereas all others in the volume are in orange. The Melbourne impression is also in orange, with an orange framing line and plate number as in copy E. No other copy of *Jerusalem* has these features. Thus it seems likely that the Melbourne print was once part of—or at least printed, colored, and inscribed in preparation for—copy E. Perhaps Blake removed it to sell or give to Linnell, from whose collection it was acquired by the Gallery in 1918. Blake then took an impression in black ink already on hand and colored it in sympathy with

the other plates in copy E. For more on this theory, see Essick, "William Blake's *Jerusalem*, Plate 51, *Art Bulletin of Victoria* 31 (1990): 20-25.

136: "There is . . . not a single piece of evidence to indicate Thornton's reaction to Blake's wood engravings" illustrating the imitation of Virgil's Eclogue I by Ambrose Philips (not "Phillips," Gott 134). But we do have Thornton's comment, published in the book and quoted by Gott, that Blake's cuts "display less of art than genius." This dichotomy assumes the same distinction between execution ("art") and conception ("genius") against which Blake argued so vigorously. In spite of his proleptic objections, such views are altogether typical of later nineteenth-century (and some twentieth-century) reactions to Blake.

Gott's incisive comments on the rugged graphic style of the Virgil wood engravings implicitly disagree with Butlin's statement that a "softer form of neoclassicism...persists in the late illustrations to Thornton's *Virgil*" (23). Butlin's observation and his intriguing comparison of the Virgil designs to Stothard's work (43n24) ring true for Blake's preliminary drawings, but not for the prints. Their small size should not hinder a perception of their primitive power. Gott (136, 138) speculates that Blake may have cut down the blocks himself to fit Thornton's small volumes. This certainly could have been the case, but we cannot extrapolate from such an activity that Blake trimmed his work willingly.

141: Gott notes that the first printing of the Job engravings consisted "of 150 sets of 'Proof' impressions on laid India paper, 65 sets on French paper and 100 sets on 'Drawing paper.'" He also

refers to the French and drawing paper impressions as "plainer" than those on laid India. However, all impressions on what is presumably the "French" paper are in the first publication state with the word "Proof" lower right. The paper may be "plainer," but the impressions are in the same state as the laid India sets. Only the "drawing paper" sets are in a later state with the "Proof" inscription removed.

152: "In 1838 [Linnell] took the [Dante] plates to the printers Dixon and Ross, and had a total of 120 so-called 'proofs' editioned on a thin India paper laid for strength onto French Colombier paper." According to the Dixon and Ross daybook transcribed in G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Books* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977) 545, 25 sets were printed on India laid on thick Colombier and 13 sets (plus four extra impressions), were printed on India laid on Colombier for a total of 38 4/7 sets. The often-cited "120" figure resulted from Geoffrey Keynes's misunderstanding of the Dixon and Ross entry for the second group. "Colombier" is a paper size, about 34 1/2 x 2 1/2 inches, not a specific manufacturer. There is no clear evidence that the Dante plates were pulled on "French" paper in 1838.

161: The reproduction of the hand-colored *Night Thoughts*, acquired by the Gallery in 1989, shows that the fly-title to *Night the Second* is in the rare first published state. The friend standing in Time's lap has female breasts and a pot belly; the friend on the right extends one finger on his left hand downwards. These odd features were removed in the state commonly found.